

Significance of Impacts

The regulations issued by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to implement NEPA define significance as being a function of both *context* and *intensity*.

Context This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short-term and long-term effects are relevant.

Intensity This refers to the severity of the impact. Responsible officials must bear in mind that more than one agency may make decisions about partial aspects of a major action. The following should be considered in evaluating intensity:

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.
2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.
3. Uniqueness characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park land, prime farmland, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.
4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.
5. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.
6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.
7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulative significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by breaking it down into small component parts.
8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.
9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.
10. Whether the action threatens a violation of federal state or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

-- 40 CFR 1508.2

Using the above considerations to examine the action in light of the intensity of potential impacts will provide a great deal of information about the proposed transportation project, but remember that whether an impact is a significant impact depends not only on the absolute value of an impact but also on the circumstances under which the impact is considered. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action, and short and long term effects should be considered. For example, consider the locality and the area - residential, industrial, commercial, undisturbed natural site, etc. how will the local interests and resources be affected?

Significance is, among other things, a NEPA document test. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) states that an environmental impact statement (EIS) must be prepared for major actions significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. To determine the appropriate class of action and thereby the requisite level of documentation necessary to comply with NEPA, it is essential to understand the term "significance", and how it is determined.

Remember, however:

- Alternatives analysis is not dependent on Significance of impacts.
- Mitigation is not dependent on Significance of impacts.